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Chair

Mr. Pat Finnigan

Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food

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● (1625)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC)): Good afternoon everyone and welcome to the committee.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Monday, April 28, 2018, the committee is beginning its study on the mental health challenges that Canadian farmers, ranchers, and producers face. We will be hearing from two witnesses today.

First, joining us by video conference from Regina, Saskatchewan, we have Michael Hoffort, the president and CEO of Farm Credit Canada.

Good afternoon, Mr. Hoffort.

Next, we have Tom Rosser, assistant deputy minister of the strategic policy branch at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Good afternoon, Mr. Rosser.

We are pleased to have both of you here. You will each have up to seven minutes for your presentation, and we will start with Mr. Hoffort, in Regina.

Mr. Hoffort, you have the floor for seven minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Hoffort (President and Chief Executive Officer, Farm Credit Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, everybody. It is a pleasure to appear before the Standing Committee on Agriculture and Agri-Food on behalf of Farm Credit Canada, or FCC as I'll refer to us today.

My name is Michael Hoffort, and I am the president and CEO of FCC.

For those who don't already know, FCC is a self-sustaining commercial crown corporation with more than 100,000 customers, mostly small and medium-sized primary producers. We also have a diverse and growing number of agrifood and agribusiness customers across the country.

FCC has a healthy portfolio of more than $33 billion, and we represent about 30% of the total agriculture lending in Canada. What sets us apart is that we are the only financial institution solely dedicated to Canadian agriculture and agrifood.

We understand the volatility and complexities of agriculture, and we take our responsibilities as an industry partner and corporate citizen very seriously. Without reservation, I can say that FCC, along with our more than 1,800 employees, apply a high degree of energy and comm... to the success and ultimately the well-being of our customers and their farm families.

We know that farming can be unpredictable. The difference between profit and financial loss for producers often depends on several factors, some well beyond their control, be it weather, market conditions, or commodity or input prices. The reality is that things don't always go according to plan, which can have serious impacts on a farmer's operation and perhaps even their emotional and mental well-being. FCC supports our customers with unique loan products that are specifically designed for agriculture, such as our flexi-loan product.

We're also there when the unexpected happens. For example, we recently announced a new customer support program for maple syrup producers in Quebec and New Brunswick, as they were impacted by unfavourable weather that reduced their yields this past spring.

We care about the safety of our customers, as farming can be a hazardous profession. FCC is a long-time partner of the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association. We also support STARS air ambulance to provide critical care and transportation for rural residents across the three prairie provinces.

In times of crisis, we support our customers through the FCC ag crisis fund, which helps them through disasters like floods or tornados, barn or house fires, the death of a customer or family member, farm accidents, or critical illnesses. During our last fiscal year, we reached out to 287 customers impacted by crisis.

We do a lot to ensure the financial and physical health of our customers. Can we do more to support their mental health and well-being? Absolutely, and we are.

That said, I don't want to leave you with the impression that FCC has full expertise in the area of mental health. What we can offer is our observations from the many conversations we have with customers day in and day out based on the strong relationships we have developed with them over the years as well as our understanding of the unique circumstances they face.

We sometimes come across situations where people are suffering from stress, anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion, and burnout either related to their business or other life circumstances. I began my career some 30 years ago at the peak of the farm debt crisis, and from then until now, I've learned that mental health issues can surface just as easily in strong economic times as they can in difficult times.

Hard work, resilience, strength, and a sense of community have always been the hallmarks of life on the farm, but there are also times when producers feel a sense of frustration and anxiety. Compounded by feelings of hopelessness and isolation, an individual's mental health can understandably spiral into depression. We have seen this scenario play out before, and unfortunately it sometimes results in a customer taking their own life, which in turn impacts the lives of many others.

We are seeing first-hand the need for increased support in this area, as more applications to our ag crisis fund appear to be related to incidents that have suicide as a factor. Rather than hoping the signs of mental distress will simply go away, we want to be part of the solution.

We're equipping our employees with the information they need to identify mental health issues and provide customers with support and advice on where they can turn for professional help. At the same time, FCC is entering a partnership with the Do More Agriculture Foundation to begin creating a network of mental health responders who can identify and support producers who may need help coping in a difficult time.

Through this project, FCC's funding will facilitate mental health first aid training for producers and industry representatives in select communities across Canada. We're also in discussions with 4-H Canada to determine a program for 4-H leaders and members to increase their understanding of mental health.

In these ways, FCC is also working to lift the stigma around mental health by promoting awareness, encouraging dialogue with customers and throughout the industry, and actively referring resources. We have plans to do much more with some initiatives in the early stages of development.

No matter what changes take place, FCC will continue to serve our customers and Canadian agriculture as a strong and stable partner through all business cycles. More importantly, and as I said earlier, our entire focus is on agriculture. We are here for this industry and for our customers and as we celebrate their success, FCC will also be here for them in challenging times.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. I look forward to any questions the committee may have.

● (1630)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Thank you very much, Mr. Hoffort.

I will now turn the floor over to Mr. Rosser for his presentation.

Mr. Tom Rosser (Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic Policy Branch, Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am pleased to be before the committee once again and, especially, to discuss an issue as important as mental health.

[*English*]

As you noted at the outset, Mr. Chair, my name is Tom Rosser. I'm the assistant deputy minister of strategic policy at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

I'm happy to be here today to speak of growing concerns around mental health issues faced by Canadian farmers, ranchers, and producers. I promise to keep my remarks very brief.

Mental health of course is a societal issue that touches all people. As Mike noted in his remarks, the situation in the agriculture sector is unique in that producers face many risks well beyond their control, whether from commodity prices, animal health issues, labour, trade, or other challenges. Mental health in this sector has become a key topic raised by stakeholders such as the Canadian Federation of Agriculture, and it is increasingly being recognized by industry as a major area of concern.

A 2016 University of Guelph survey showed that farmers are among the most vulnerable when it comes to mental health. Of the 1,000 Canadian farmers contacted for a survey, 45% were experiencing high stress levels, 58% reported symptoms of anxiety, and 35% were dealing with depression. All those figures are much higher than the average found in the general population. Similarly, a 2010 study in the *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* suggested that farming is among the professions with the greatest risk of suicidal death in Canada.

[*Translation*]

Promoting dialogue about mental health challenges faced by farmers, ranchers, and producers is essential for creating an environment where these issues can be discussed openly and with compassion. In that regard, I would like to acknowledge the parliamentary secretary for the courage he has shown in talking publicly about his personal experience during National Suicide Prevention Week in February 2018.

Although health is a provincial jurisdiction, the federal government is committed to working with the provinces, as well as industry partners, to support the mental health of farmers, ranchers, and producers. For example, budget 2017 confirmed $5 billion over 10 years directly to provinces and territories to improve mental health and addiction services.

For its part, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada supports action through federal/provincial cost-shared funding under the Canadian agricultural partnership, which can be used by provincial governments to tackle issues that are creating challenges and stress for the producers in their jurisdictions. This funding can also be used by provinces to directly support mental health initiatives in the sector, including farm stress lines and crisis counselling for individuals, youth, and families living on the farm.

In addition, business risk management programs are in place to help producers manage significant risks that threaten the viability of a farm and are beyond their capacity to manage.

The department is also continuing to explore ways that its policies, programs, and services can further support initiatives to address the mental health challenges faced by those in the sector. The department is committed to working with its federal, provincial, and industry partners to support the mental health of those in the agriculture and agrifood sector.

Other national resources are available to Canadian farmers, ranchers, and producers, such as through Crisis Services Canada—a series of non-profit distress and crisis service centres across Canada that offer service to anyone thinking about or affected by suicide.

● (1635)

[*English*]

As you heard a short while ago from Mike, Farm Credit Canada is also working actively to lift the stigma around mental health by promoting awareness of resources available to its stakeholders.

Mike also noted the industry is taking the lead in this area. For example, The Do More Agriculture Foundation officially launched in January 2018 with the aim of creating awareness of mental health issues in agriculture, building a community of belonging, and driving further research in this area.

In addition, organizations such as the Canadian Federation of Agriculture and the Canadian Canola Growers Association are working actively to create awareness on mental health issues through their conferences and annual general meetings and the like.

Farmers, ranchers, and producers are the backbone of the Canadian agriculture and agrifood sector, ensuring its continued growth, success, and sustainability.

We all need to work together to take further action on this important issue. By increasing awareness, reducing risk factors, improving access to quality mental health services, and eliminating the stigma often associated with mental illness, we can support a compassionate approach to mental well-being in the sector.

I thank the committee for making mental health a priority in your work and look forward to your report on this issue. I would like to thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee, for providing us with an opportunity to speak with you today.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Thank you very much, Mr. Rosser.

We will now move into questions and comments.

Mr. Barlow, you may go ahead for six minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. John Barlow (Foothills, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank our witnesses for being here and participating in what I think is going to be a very interesting process. Before I get started, I want to thank my colleagues Mr. Dreeshen and Mr. Poissant for bringing this forward. I think it's a very important issue that has come to the forefront, certainly over the last several months. I know we can all work together and put together a very worthwhile study on this issue.

I think many of us have been dealing with this long before these last few months. This hits particularly close to home for me. Growing up we went to several funerals, and we were never allowed to say the death was due to a suicide; this happened on the farm and was never talked about with anyone else. We were supposed to keep this to ourselves. It was a family issue. We didn't want anybody else to know. I think we can all relate to the phrase "cowboy up". It's very frustrating that it has taken this long for us to come forward and be able to have a conversation about it.

Mr. Hoffort, can you go into a little more detail for me, please, on the ag crisis fund? You brought that up initially, that it helped in times of funerals, accidental deaths, things like that. How is that funded? What money is set aside for that? Is there a lot of awareness about it? We're starting to talk about this issue. Do people know it's there? Can they access that when they have mental health issues or they think a family member needs some help?

Mr. Michael Hoffort: Mr. Chair, we do the ag crisis fund within our organization for our customers. A relatively small amount of funding goes into it on a per instant basis, recognizing that our farm customers often have insurance and things like that to manage a fire or a tornado or expenses as it relates to a death. It's an opportunity for us to reach out and provide some financial gesture and support for our customers. It's fully funded by our organization. Last year, as I mentioned, we reached out to 287 customers in that scenario. We funded $405,000.

What's interesting is already this past two and a half months 67 situations have taken place in that program, so it was a very difficult April and May on the farms. To step back, last year two circumstances out of 287 involved suicide. Already, out of the 67 we had this year, eight have involved suicide, three being the farm operator and five being children, which is quite alarming. We're hoping this is not a growing trend.

Mr. John Barlow: It seems as if the ag crisis fund has been geared to addressing the consequences but there maybe hasn't been any focus on trying to address some of these issues before they happen. For example, are there any options or opportunities with what could be described as an accidental death to expand the scope of that fund to include mental health crisis assistance or counselling or anything like that for those who see it as something they need?

● (1640)

Mr. Michael Hoffort: Quite potentially, in terms of where we'll go with some of our mental health offers, that's an option for us, whether we would fund it through our crisis fund or as an issue that would be very specific to mental health so it doesn't get lost in that particular area of funding and administration. In terms of how we would work with customers, we're actively exploring what that could look like and very much just giving people that first step to reach out and see where they would want to go and perhaps some financial assistance to make that happen. It's not off the table, for sure.

Mr. John Barlow: Maybe you could set up a secondary fund or something specifically for that.

Bayer has come forward with financial assistance for Do More Ag of about $20,000 or something along that line. Is there an opportunity to work with some of your partners, industry groups and things like that, to establish that kind of a fund? I would assume there would be some good buy-in.

Mr. Michael Hoffort: I would think that if we were to come up with a concept that made a lot of sense, there would be broad industry support in financing. Providing some of that wouldn't be the issue. It's mostly who could take it forward, coordinate it, and then decide who to reach out to to make the applications and those types of things.

In some cases, the farm groups have filled that space, but I think in a lot of ways it's varied across the country in terms of how that's happened. It's an area we could explore, absolutely.

Mr. John Barlow: I'd like to ask a question on 4-H but I'm going to jump to Mr. Rosser very quickly because I have only about a minute left.

I think one of the biggest issues we are facing as we are tackling this issue is awareness. You touched on that. Is there any plan through Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada in terms of an awareness campaign, something like "it's okay to come forward and admit you have a mental health issue"? Certainly you touched on that. The uncertainty that we deal with in agriculture is more than in any other industry, and certainly people have just never come forward. They have never felt comfortable.

I think that would be a first step. Are there any plans for an awareness campaign that might be done through either Health Canada or Agriculture Canada?

Mr. Tom Rosser: As Mike described and as the member described, there has been an evolution across society in thinking and openness about mental health, and we certainly are serious about doing our part to help to try to advance that in terms of the agriculture sector.

Similar to what Mike described with FCC, we do that working through partnerships with industry. The way many of our programs are structured, both the cost-shared programs and the federal-only programs under the Canadian agricultural partnership, proponents bring forward applications for their priorities—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Mr. Rosser, I hope someone will ask you to continue the question.

Your time is up, Mr. Barlow.

The next speaker will be Lloyd Longfield.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thanks, both of you, for being here to start this study for us.

The University of Guelph was mentioned earlier. I know the University of Guelph has been working with the Do More Agriculture Foundation. Do More Ag doesn't do research, but it finds funding for research, so there is a symbiotic relationship with the University of Guelph.

In terms of research and connecting to Health Canada research and partnerships with Agriculture Canada, could we talk a little bit more about where we are on the state of research with farmers, producers, their families, and particularly teens and young adults?

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, I'd simply say I did make reference to a couple of studies. My own assessment is that although there have been a couple of important studies done in this field, which have yielded results which would suggest that relative to the general population there is a significant issue in agriculture, my impression of the literature is that this is not an area that has been exhaustively studied and that there very likely is scope for further research to better inform efforts to target resources.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: One of the suggestions from the University of Guelph is to create a centre of excellence for agricultural mental health and to access research from across Canada, from different communities and different situations.

Is a centre of excellence something that is being considered? Is it active consideration or is it something that's just been suggested at this point?

● (1645)

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, I'm not specifically aware of discussions around that. I would say though that there is an awful lot of goodwill around this issue, whether with agricultural groups, governments, industry suppliers, or organizations like FCC, and there is a lot of momentum. We talked about the Do More Agriculture Foundation. We are seeing new institutions pop up. We are well positioned to be a partner in advancing things and finding solutions. Certainly a centre of excellence, off the top of my head, would sound like something worthy of discussion but I'm not specifically aware of detailed discussions around the creation of one.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Potentially, through the new ag partnership funding, that might be an application that could go in.

Mr. Tom Rosser: Certainly there is sufficient flexibility within our federal-only programming that we can support activities or projects related to mental health that are brought forward by other partners.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Okay, thanks.

Looking at accessibility of care, we can talk about admitting there's a problem, reducing the stigma, but at the end of the day, people need help. How are we addressing the shortage of psychiatrists? Are we looking at online services?

Has FCC done any work on how we actually deliver care and assistance to people who need it?

Mr. Michael Hoffort: In that space, we have not. A lot of it started with our employees, making sure that they can recognize some of the stresses when they see that one of their customers is experiencing some above-normal stress levels and they are able to direct them into some of the programming that's available. It does vary, as I said, across the country. UPA has a very significant program in Quebec. There's some work done with some of the federations in some of the other provinces, and there is a farm stress line in Saskatchewan, the province where I sit. It's a bit of a patchwork, I would suggest. What we've done for our team is to make sure they know how to access the various crisis lines that are out there.

As to what we would consider in the way of the longer term, I don't know if that would be quite in our space, but even something that would be a bit in the day to day, just some tools, whether it's an online app or something that would allow them to access some immediate information to sort through a situation and allow them to get something more substantive would probably be what we would be looking at.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: Thank you.

I've been working in my community in Guelph and also within Wellington County on mental health and how we provide services to people who need them both in the urban centre of Guelph and the surrounding community.

Something that's come from the studies we've been doing is the connection between binge drinking or self-medicating with alcohol or drugs and the incidence of suicide. There is also the incidence of serious mental health problems among youth using alcohol or drugs to medicate themselves to relieve stress or anxiety. Has there been any consideration around alcohol or drugs and their impact on rural communities?

Mr. Michael Hoffort: From our perspective, the access I've had to that conversation has been mostly through one of our professional speakers, Dr. George Sabongui. He's a mental health stress specialist who talks about the key factors that contribute to some of the challenges with mental health. For sure, lack of sleep, alcohol, those types of things are key contributors. The direct line to things like suicide, I'm not qualified to comment on.

Mr. Lloyd Longfield: It's surprising to me, because I was thinking it was more of an urban problem when we talked about opioids, but when we got into rural communities, it's just as big a problem, if not bigger, by the concentration per person.

That's about as much as I have. Thank you both for your answers. I'll give my remaining 15 seconds to the chair.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Thank you, Mr. Longfield, for making my job easier. That's very nice of you.

Mr. MacGregor, you have the floor for six minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Alistair MacGregor (Cowichan—Malahat—Langford, NDP): Thank you very much, Chair.

Mr. Rosser, I think I'll start my questions with you.

We've seen references to the farming community being quite a tough lot of individuals, and there's that stigma about talking about these things, but there are other professions in which this kind of condition has existed—in the military, for example, and in our first responders. Now the military has a culture where PTSD and mental health are openly talked about, and people are encouraged to seek help. It's the same with our first responders, the paramedics, the fire and police services.

Maybe one main difference is that those environments depend on teams where colleagues need to have the full support of each other, whereas farmers are often out by themselves, working long hours, with no one really to talk to. We can't change the variables that are inducing the stress. Are there any lessons your department could be learning from the Department of National Defence or Public Safety Canada? Are there any best practices for how they have dealt with the problem in their respective fields that might be applicable to agriculture?

● (1650)

Mr. Tom Rosser: That's a very constructive suggestion. To my knowledge, we have not actively engaged with colleagues at DND or Public Safety on issues related to mental health and their experiences, where they are perhaps more advanced and more experienced in dealing with the issues than we are.

When we talk about cultural change, we work very closely with agricultural associations and other industry groups across the country and often look to them to direct us in how we can be a helpful partner in changing the culture of the sector around mental health, as opposed to directing or trying to dictate things from the department.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: You mentioned that health care delivery, of course, is a provincial jurisdiction and you noted that budget 2017 had committed $5 billion over 10 years. However, that's to the pretty broad area of mental health and addiction services.

As we know, in provinces such as mine, British Columbia, the opioid crisis is front and centre. One of the strengths of the federal government is to ensure that we don't end up with a patchwork quilt of differing support systems.

What is Agriculture Canada doing to ensure that some of these funds are in fact being allocated to farmers so that someone in P.E.I. is getting the same type of services as someone in Saskatchewan?

Mr. Tom Rosser: I can't speak to the details of the Health Canada funding and the negotiations between the federal government and the provinces around the use of the money. We do take an active and growing interest in mental health in a rural context.

As I think Mike noted in his remarks, this is a relatively new issue for us, one in which we're very engaged, where we sense a lot of goodwill and a lot of momentum, where we want to be a productive partner. We're learning as we go forward in terms of how we can play a leadership role and be a good partner in addressing mental health issues.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Thank you.

I'd like both of you to comment on my next question.

Both of you made mention of making use of industry partnerships. Often farmers are out in the field by themselves dealing with very long work hours. However, there are certain times of the year when people in small communities do come together. I'm thinking specifically of fairs and agricultural exhibitions. We do have the Canadian Association of Fairs and Exhibitions, and I know at those events, particularly in my riding, you often see a Farm Credit Canada booth and an Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada booth.

At those fairs, are your organizations starting to provide display material and pamphlets that people can come and pick up? Are those now an active part of your displays at fairs?

Mr. Tom Rosser: I would just comment briefly that the other place where you get a large gathering of producers is at annual general meetings of associations. I know the Canadian Federation of Agriculture dedicated a session to mental health at their gathering earlier this year, and the Canola Growers Association and others have, too.

We're amenable to being a good partner and certainly we'll take note of the suggestion that we use our presence at other sector events to raise awareness about tools and resources related to mental health.

Mr. Alistair MacGregor: Mr. Hoffort.

Mr. Michael Hoffort: From an FCC perspective, we come at this from a few different angles. We do a number of speaker sponsorships at association meetings and at major agriculture shows. Mental health would be one of the topics that we're really sponsoring into at this stage.

Canada's Farm Progress Show is a major dryland agriculture equipment show taking place next month here in Regina, Saskatchewan. We sponsor their speaker forum. There will be three days of speakers, and one day is designated for mental health. We'll have Michael Landsberg from TSN. He will be one of the speakers. He will be talking about his story with regard to mental health and the need to speak out and reach out to find support.

In terms of our booth presence, i don't think we have anything that would be quite in line with the depth that the member is suggesting. However, one of the initiatives we do have is to have a mental health tool kit by the end of this calendar year, a publication type of thing with solid, professional types of documentation about managing the pressure of the farm. We would distribute it widely and free of charge so that people would have something that they could hang on to, to reference in future times. That's one of the initiatives we are working on right now.

● (1655)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Thank you very much, Mr. Hoffort.

Thank you as well, Mr. MacGregor.

It is now your turn, Mr. Peschisolido. You have six minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Joe Peschisolido (Steveston—Richmond East, Lib.): *Merci*, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Hoffort and Mr. Rosser. It's great to see you again. I'd like to echo the comments of my colleagues that this is a very important study, and also thank Mr. Dreeshen for his focus and commitment to this.

I don't recall who it was, perhaps Mr. Barlow or Mr. MacGregor, who was talking about other sectors of society and what we can learn from them. In Vancouver there is a stigma within certain ethnic communities with regard to depression or suicide, as I think there is within the farming community. Farmers are tough, so no one wants to be weak. In what way can we quantify the problem? I don't think we have a full grasp of the extent of the situation, and before you can fix something, you have to figure out exactly where you are.

I'd like to ask both of you, Farm Credit and the ministry, what we can do to quantify things but in a fairly quick and accurate fashion.

Mr. Tom Rosser: I would simply note that we have reviewed the available literature on the incidence of mental health challenges in the agricultural sector. The numbers available are worrying. They suggest there is a significant problem disproportionate to the size of the population.

Again, the research available would appear to be fairly limited. I think in terms of quantification of the magnitude of the problem and the specific nature of the problem, there probably is scope for further research to better understand more precisely the nature of the problem and hopefully inform what some of the most promising solutions might be.

Mr. Michael Hoffort: From FCC's perspective, we would very much be anecdotally looking at what we're observing, be it through our crisis fund or through other interactions we have with customers and things that flow up into my office from our team. I couldn't agree more that some more study would be helpful to really understand the depth and the breadth of the issue just so we can take proper action. I couldn't agree more.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: I think another part of our strategy would be to go into the various farming communities and say, "Look, it's okay. It's okay to have issues. It's all right to deal with things in a certain way. It's not a sign of weakness." Mr. Barlow talked about 4-H. I think where he would be going on that is how can we use organizations like 4-H to start talking about that issue at an earlier age.

Mr. Michael Hoffort: From an FCC perspective, 4-H is one of our significant sponsorships. We do focus a lot on youth in agriculture, and 4-H, of course, is a flagship organization, with over 25,000 members and 7,000 leaders. What we are working on with them right now is enhancing their healthy living program. Bringing in a focus on mental health is one of the key things to that. Their leaders can recognize it and they can sponsor and teach on the program. Also, their members have access to more awareness to break down some of these stigmas, for lack of a better term, that will help them, as they grow from young adults into adulthood, to have a different attitude than perhaps generations past have had on that subject.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: Mr. Rosser.

Mr. Tom Rosser: I'd only add that we too have a history of partnership with 4-H. To my knowledge, to date that has not included mental health, but we are in the early weeks of a new framework, and there are opportunities to take a look at things anew.

● (1700)

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: Other institutions or stakeholders within society are the schools, the colleges, and the universities. We understand that we live in a confederation, so there are a variety of jurisdictions. Generally speaking, what can be done to work with educational institutions, be they the colleges, the universities, the University of Guelph or Kwantlen in Steveston—Richmond East, to put a spotlight on it but also to say, "Hey, you know what? It is an issue, and let's deal with it in a proper way"?

Mr. Tom Rosser: Mr. Chair, I'd simply agree with the member.

Certainly, as a department, we have a very well-established relationship with the agricultural and veterinary colleges across the country and the institutions that bring them together. Although that relationship hasn't branched into mental health issues, one can easily imagine how by working through our traditional partners and having them reach out to the relevant faculties in their respective institutions, new ideas and new possibilities can emerge from that dialogue.

Mr. Joe Peschisolido: Mr. Chair, I'm pretty well done now.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Thank you very much. You're very generous with your time. It's too bad that I'm not on the other side to ask questions.

It is now over to Mr. Poissant, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food.

You have six minutes.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant (La Prairie, Lib.): I'd like to begin by thanking Mr. Hoffort and Mr. Rosser. I'd also like to express my sincere thanks to the committee for examining this issue as it affects Canadian farmers.

Mr. Hoffort, you said earlier that your financial advisers had received training. Where did they receive the training, and was it provided by people in the mental health community?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Hoffort: From a training perspective, what we've focused on with our team is mental health first aid. That's typically been done through partnership with Bridges Health, which is a professional organization involved in that space, or with other partners like that across the country.

The sponsorship we're working on with Do More Ag in our partnership is to take that same mental health first aid training to markets across the country and to allow a greater number of people to recognize when something is not as it should be, and to have the resources they need to at least stabilize the situation and get people pointed in the direction they need to be to get the help they require.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Most big businesses already have human resources in place to help employees when they go through a hard time in the workplace, but it isn't quite as easy to do in the agricultural sector.

I was involved in a Government of Quebec pilot project that lasted six years. The purpose was to assess the distress experienced by farmers. The project resulted in three highly informative reports showing how help could be provided to farmers.

Numerous cases of farmers in distress have been noted, so we need to address the issue at a fundamental level. Do you visit schools to talk about the challenges farmers can face? We all know how difficult the process of transferring a farm can be. Do you have opportunities to discuss those things?

Mr. Tom Rosser: I'd like to thank the parliamentary secretary for his question.

We are in touch with young farmers groups, and as far as I know, the issue of mental health hasn't led to any new partnerships. The new Canadian agricultural partnership, however, will provide an opportunity to have mental health discussions with those organizations and to set up partnerships that prioritize mental health.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: You said that $5 million had been allocated to mental health initiatives. Is that enough to address the issue, or does it simply scratch the surface? The problem is much more prevalent than we think.

● (1705)

Mr. Tom Rosser: As you are no doubt aware, $1 billion over five years in federal programming has been allocated under the partnership. The programs will take into account the priorities of stakeholders applying for funding. More and more, mental health is being seen as an important issue.

I'm convinced that, with the applications we've received since April 1, an increasing number of stakeholders are seeing mental health as a priority and are asking for funding to carry out projects, studies, and so forth.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Multiple initiatives are under way in the provinces where farmers work. Is there any sort of database that captures the various supports available on the ground, so that we can determine which ones are effective and use them to help farmers?

Mr. Tom Rosser: I know certain websites list the resources available in the various provinces. To my knowledge, though, there isn't a database that captures all of those services. That said, some resources endeavour to do just that, but informally.

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: Just before I wrap up, I'd like to know, Mr. Hoffort, whether you keep track of the ages of farmers who face challenges, the type of farming they do, and the reason they need counselling. Do you keep any statistics on that?

[*English*]

Mr. Michael Hoffort: Thank you for the question.

We wouldn't have those numbers for you. I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Claude Poissant: I see. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Thank you very much, Mr. Poissant.

Before I turn the floor over to Mr. Dreeshen, I'd like to ask Mr. Rosser a question.

Mr. Rosser, does it fall under the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food's mandate to provide support to farmers with mental health issues? You said numerous times this was something fairly new. How have you incorporated it into your responsibilities? Both the federal department and provincial ministries are involved, so numerous stakeholders come into play. Does your department really have a mandate to support the mental health of farmers, ranchers, and producers? Is it within your mandate?

Mr. Tom Rosser: Thank you for your question.

While it is true that we don't have a formal mandate to address mental health, we nevertheless have programs and a mandate to support the well-being of Canada's agricultural sector. We have long had programs to assist with funding, falling prices, and drought challenges, just to name a few.

As I mentioned a few times, we do have some flexibility when it comes to the programming we deliver to support the various sectors in accordance with their specific priorities. Both stakeholders and industry are realizing that mental health is a priority. We have the flexibility to factor that into our program funding.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): Thank you very much.

I used the member's remaining time for that question.

I think it's a good one. It might help inform the committee's recommendations. The information may help us define the department's role clearly.

I will now put my vice-chair hat back on and turn the floor over to Mr. Dreeshen for six minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Earl Dreeshen (Red Deer—Mountain View, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you so much to the witnesses who are here today.

When I first came on the committee, it was at the end of January and it happened to be Bell Let's Talk day. I felt it was extremely important that we have this discussion and we recognize just what is taking place in the farming community. One of the things I haven't heard so far that I want to put on the table, and perhaps we can all then frame our thoughts and discussions around this, is the recognition that our jobs as farmers are our homes, and our homes are our jobs.

That's the key part of this. We never get away from the stress that is there, and that stress also goes through all members of the family. That is the critical part of this, that particular recognition.

I've seen the great work that some, especially farm wives, have done to help bring this discussion to the forefront. There are some great young producers from Saskatchewan who have done some amazing work in this regard, and I applaud them.

International events such as hog prices going down, BSE disease outbreaks, or barn fires, all of these kinds of things are part of your home and part of what you do. As we look at this, I know we've talked about other sectors and the problems that exist there, and there's a study out of the U.S., done not that long ago, that says the suicide rate on farms is three times the national average. I heard us discussing here that it was close to two times the national average.

Those are some of the facts of the relationship that exists. As Mr. Barlow indicated earlier, growing up we just didn't talk about that. We would go to the funerals and that type of thing, but that discussion was not part of what we were dealing with.

That's the key part. As a farmer, you are responsible for the labour. You're responsible for the marketing of goods. You have to deal with the whims of government, as well as the weather, and so on. Those are the kinds of things that are there every day, and that's really one of the key components of what we are trying to do.

What can be done? As a former 4-H member, I know that is one of the keys. Your head, your heart, and your hands are part of what we speak to in 4-H.

That's a critical part, to be able to expand that and to bring it, as some of my colleagues mentioned, to fairs and exhibitions and point it out, but to have a strategy that recognizes that it is different from the general public. Yes, you bring home the stresses that you have from the job that you went to, but they don't surround you.

Mr. Hoffort, you mentioned that you were looking for a strategy in these challenging times and that you have some plans. Can you explain what some of those strategies are and whether you are actually working with not just clinical psychologists who can talk about the issues, and so on, but people who are on the farms, so that we can perhaps set up some types of guidelines that actually come from people who feel it every day in their community?

● (1710)

Mr. Michael Hoffort: Our first strategy is to work with the Do More Agriculture Foundation. The individuals behind that are farmers and they recognize some of the challenges that are out there and have really taken a leadership role. It would be our sponsorship of the first aid programs, with professionals in the room who understand agriculture, who will provide that training.

The second one would be on the youth and that 4-H investment in terms of their programming, making sure that it is meeting the needs of its members and meeting the needs of its leaders, so that it can work with its membership to make sure they understand the importance of mental health and break down any stigmas, but also where do they turn.

Another initiative we're considering is the mental health tool kit, a document put together with individuals who are professionals in this area but understand agriculture, be it Dr. Sabongui at the University of Guelph or some of the Do More Agriculture folks, to make sure we have a document that people would want to maintain and be able to reference back and create conversation within their families.

It just grows out from there in terms of speaker opportunities and awareness opportunities that we can sponsor. Recognizing that as an organization our expertise is somewhat limited, but to have the impact we can have and to bring others along, industry partnerships to make these initiatives bigger than they would be otherwise would be one of our tactics, for sure.

● (1715)

Mr. Earl Dreeshen: Thank you very much.

Mr. Rosser, from listening to the discussions we've heard so far, do you know of any initiatives the federal government could look at that also would look at the unique circumstances that exist for farmers? You mentioned that there are overall discussions about what can be done in mental health and so on. I'm just curious to know whether or not you see any way of adjusting some of the programs that you do have that might be able to take that into account.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): You have 24 seconds.

[*English*]

Mr. Tom Rosser: I would simply note that this is very much an evolving field. Just in the course of our very brief conversation here, I've heard a number of constructive suggestions about what more we can do to raise awareness. Certainly in evolving our programs, how we operate, and our traditional ways of thinking, I think we'd be very open to looking at how we can try to be part of a solution to mental health challenges.

As I said, I've heard several very constructive suggestions here this afternoon.

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Luc Berthold): You didn't go over your 24 seconds, Mr. Rosser. Well done.

Mr. Rosser and Mr. Hoffort, thank you both for participating in our discussion today. On behalf of all the committee members, I want to say how informative your answers were. They have helped kick-start what should be an in-depth study that we hope will make a meaningful difference for Canadian farmers. Thank you very much, and I encourage both of you to keep abreast of the committee's work in the fall, as it may provide guidance on the next steps.

We will now suspend briefly in order to move in camera to discuss committee business.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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